What the Dog brought in

Probably not that thing, but another thing

Zero Philosophy
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§00 — Carrie slouched into the house, whimpering strangely. She was carrying something in her mouth. Whatever the thing was, it wasn't moving. It looked dead in some way, rather than merely inanimate, whether or not it had ever been alive.

"Filthy mutt gone brought in some damn thing," Jeb muttered to no one in particular.

He started off the sofa before taking in more. Then he stopped. The sheer enigma of the thing froze him.

At first, it was difficult to get a definite sense of it. The color was vaguely consistent with an animal corpse left out in the heat far too long. The smell evoked decaying meat, but was both subtler and somehow worse. Perception fell back from it, repulsed. Dogs ate disgusting refuse – but still. *How could she?*

Carrie looked odd. An obscure impression of sickness attended her. Yet she also appeared peculiarly alert. Her hackles were raised, as if by some indescribable state of excitement. Her eyes were feverishly bright.

§01 — Little Marylou lifted up her head to look. There was a moment of absorption. Then she screamed. The sound was blood-chilling. It had a sonic purity that shed any mark of age, sex, even of species. It did not belong to emotion, but to sheer perception. While Marylou's phonic apparatus emitted it, its source was the thing, more than her.

§02 — Hannah ran in from the kitchen. "Baby!" she cried. "What is it baby girl?"

Marylou – not yet two – lacked the vocabulary to explain. In any case, her scream had collapsed into loud, incoherent sobbing. She pointed at the dog as she wailed. Hannah turned then, looking too. The sight stilled her.

"What is it?" she managed eventually.

"You need to get Marylou out back babe," said Jeb, ignoring the question. His voice was two-thirds strangled. "Let me deal with this."

"What're you going to do?"

“Don’t argue this babe. You’ve got to go now.”

His words made sense to her, distantly. Yet she couldn’t leave.

There was exactly one thing worse than seeing whatever it was, and that was not seeing it. For it to be *out of sight* would be terrifying in a way that she knew she couldn’t endure. To have shared a world with it, unknowingly, was already to have stumbled blindly through desolations exceeding all concept of disaster. That couldn’t be allowed to happen again. Anything at all would be easier to accept than that.

Clutching Marylou tightly to her, she took a step towards Jeb. He flicked a glance at her, silently despairing at her choice.

“Take it out girl,” he said now, to the dog, struggling to keep his voice level. “Do you understand? Take that thing out of the house, okay?”

Carrie backed away from him, just a little. Back was the direction of out, very roughly, but that wasn’t guiding her. She wasn’t leaving. That meant the thing wasn’t either. Carrie’s body trembled with stubborn defiance. Beneath the obstinacy, Hannah thought, there was a current of something hideously sly, cross-threaded with savagery. If anything, the animal’s grip on its prize intensified.

What was it that she had? She doubted, immediately, that this was the right question. The structure of possession was more complex, by far. It would tend to become infinitely absorbing, and in that lay ruin. Already, her attention was transfixed by it. Her pulse raced, accelerated by the terror that she would – at any moment – *make out* what it was. Almost it was as if she already knew – and knew that she knew – with only a flaking screen protecting her from recognition. Whatever unknowing remained to her was a treasure beyond estimation.

“Get back baby, don’t look,” Jeb was pleading, absurdly. “You don’t need to get tangled up in this.”

Marylou’s inarticulate gulping of horror had subsided into silence. She still stared, perfectly motionless, except for subtle adjustments that compensated for her mother’s slight swaying.

“Don’t look baby. Don’t look,” Hannah relayed ineffectually. “It’s nothing. Don’t look baby girl.”

In perfect passive defiance of her mother’s words, Marylou’s entire being was fixed upon the thing in Carrie’s mouth. Her world had condensed to it alone. She vacuumed it into her soul, unblinking.

“Take it out,” Jeb was still saying. “Take it outside girl.”

In another universe, in which the event was not happening, but was only being watched, or read about, Hannah might have laughed at that. Carrie wasn’t taking anything outside. There was no ‘outside’ distant enough for it. The process in motion went altogether in the other direction. It had scarcely begun to get in. The thing might have been said to be ‘making itself at home’ by someone who knew what none of these words meant. There was only unmaking at work now. It was such that no self could belong to it, or even tolerate it. Proximity was broken in some way she knew would be demonstrated eventually, when ‘at’ was forever gone, and unthinkable. Whatever of home was still cosmically possible would soon not be.

§03 — Jeb, too, was getting nowhere. Under an impulsion to act of a nature and intensity beyond all prior experience, he was nevertheless immobilized. Urgency failed to translate into action. It left him begging, uselessly and inwardly, for something that could not imaginably occur.

Frustration rose to the pitch of consummate despair. A scratchy sob escaped him.

“Don’t make me shoot you girl,” he mewled at the dog. “Don’t make me do that.”

Not that he could. Carrie’s death would fully bequeath the thing to them. A layer of insulation would be lost. The exposure would be immediately unbearable.

He was weeping silently, unconsciously. He only realized this because his vision was blurring. It was not fear that had driven him to tears. The moment had passed so far beyond fear it was unreachable from there. What wracked him was the anguish of inaction, looping repetitively on a tight circuit. It could not possibly be more important to act, but action was impossible. Round it came, back again, only that. There was a promise of infinite regret. That which he should but could not do now would devastate what remained of his life, in a way that would unendingly over-saturate it. A paralytic spasm ran through him. The thought seized him that he would do something hideously mistaken with the gun. An inexplicable domestic tragedy was impending. Hardened cops would shake their heads, not understanding. Except, they too, then, would come across the thing the dog brought in. It would still be there, amidst the red ruin, worse than all the rest.

“I can’t,” he said. Bear it, do anything, make sense of this, all at once. “I can’t.”

§04 — Marylou’s fascination with the thing had not wavered. It had not deepened only because it could not conceivably deepen. Fixation had been total from the beginning of the encounter. It absorbed her without residue. She had been vacated into it, leaning in, as if gravitationally attracted to a hole punched through the fabric of the universe.

Hannah had no doubt about the bottomless wrongness of it. Her child was being in some way consumed, from the inside out. They should go – but she could not go. Leaving would free it. Since she could not let it out of her sight, it continued to possess her child's sight, and no doubt much beyond sight. They were trapped.

§05 — From Marylou's mouth came a stream of minutely organized sounds. They made up something, but it wasn't speech. Nothing had ever been less like speech since the beginning of time.

Had Hannah been capable of movement, she would have dropped her child. No entity capable of emitting such a sound *could be* her child. Whatever it was that she held in her arms, it was more alien to her than she would have previously imagined anything could be. At the same time, their bond was unbroken, even undiminished. She whimpered like a wounded dog.

Jeb, drained of color, stared at Marylou.

"She's part of it," he said. "She's part of this. She knows how it talks."

"Talks?" croaked Hannah. She wanted, hideously, to laugh.

The thing disguised as Marylou emitted another burst of inhuman noise. Carrie appeared to listen, and to be soothed by it.

"Stop it," Hannah said. It was unclear to whom. "That's enough." As if it was no more than that.

Carrie had changed, again. All tension had left her body. She lay down quietly, the thing still held in her mouth.

"Shoot her," Hannah spat. The words had to be for Jeb, though she wasn't looking at him. "Kill the fucking dog."

He didn't. "I don't know Babe," he said.

"You don't know what?" Hannah snarled, unleashing the unbroken inner animal. "Shoot the filthy bitch."

"Carrie isn't doing this."

"Carrie is gone."

"And Marylou?" asked Jeb, as softly as he could without crossing into inaudibility. "Is she gone?"

Kill the fucking dog Hannah wanted – mostly – to repeat, but conviction had evaporated. It would be too late to help. Carrie was nothing special to it now. There were no grounds for killing the dog unless as a first step to killing everything – because only that would be enough, or perhaps still not enough.

All sense of bodily volition had seeped away. She held Marylou, still, because it had to be that way. She stood exactly where she had to be.

§06 — "What do we do now?" Jeb whispered, knowing surely there was nothing to be done.

Everything they'd ever done had brought them to this.

It culminated here, in a now of still indeterminable duration. The moment had no end. Nothing else was imaginable. Things continued only within it, stretching and modulating it. There was no 'next' following this, coming later.

"We can't leave," Hannah said. "There's no getting away from it."

It should have been obvious, and perhaps it was. Still, the thing made nothing evident, besides its being beyond dead. Carrie, too – then Marylou – had to have been fascinated by its extraordinary lifelessness.

There were two ways of being dead, she supposed. The difference between them might have been nothing, or it might not. Something could be dead by never having lived, or it could be dead by having lived, and then ceasing to. This, though, was or did neither. Or, perhaps it did one, or both, but to a point of excess that broke from them. Its way of being dead absolutely over-shadowed any conceivable type of not living. It was dead beyond all comparison. This was so unthinkable that it drew curiosity in after it.

Since there was nowhere to go, any longer, Hannah let herself be drawn in towards it.

It was horrible in a fashion that involved no repulsion. Its inanimacy was peculiarly ungraspable, as if withdrawn from apprehension by some kind of immobile scuttling. This self-retraction invited pursuit. Even in the very moment of horrified refusal, one had begun to follow it. There could be no knowing, she understood, but neither – any longer – could there be anything else.

§07 — There was a violent report as Jeb discharged the shotgun, blowing his brain out through the roof of his skull. Blood and shredded tissue sprayed upwards in a fountain burst. Then his fresh corpse hit the floor with a thump.

§08 — He had killed himself in order not to kill all of them. That was sweet of him, Hannah thought vaguely, unless, alternatively, it was the opposite. Instead of mercy, his suicide might have been the most gruesome of abandonments. In any case, he was dead in a fashion that seemed only uninteresting now. Of all the ways then to not live in the room, his was the least extraordinary.

§09 — Marylou seemed to scarcely have noticed her father's death. A delicate spatter of blood and brain tissue now decorated her face, but she made no sign of noticing, and no sound. What had happened was long set, and discounted. By now it could not have been anything less than it was. Since the thing had been brought in, only this – or worse – could occur. Destruction of her family was scorched deeply into the structure of fate. Serenely, she watched it unfold, like the replay of a movie already known by heart. It would end as it did.

More importantly, something far deathlier engrossed her. Its stillness was absolute. Yet, still, it was alien to fixity. Whatever could be stuck, it wasn't. The suggestion it made was closer to impossible speed, inwardly directed, and opaque to every sense. It departed, at a rate escaping apprehension. Not grasping it was the whole of its appearance. Nothing caught within its slipstream would ever leave.

§10 — Hannah thought her daughter was lost to her. She was even sure of it, beyond conviction, with a pure, inexplicable certainty. Marylou's continuing pulse was a signal of no relevance. A beating heart could not prevent her from being gone.

Hannah accepted it all. She would then, in place of grief, become lost to herself, and to her dark star-mass of sadness. The gate to this had been thrown open to her. It was only necessary to pass across, through it, for it to be forever over. There was no difficulty in that.

Carrie had brought them a gift. It was the last thing they would ever need.

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